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# An examination of crisis communications at major Mississippi universities

Virginia W. Mayo

*University of Mississippi. Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College*

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AN EXAMINATION OF CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS AT MAJOR MISSISSIPPI  
UNIVERSITIES

by  
Virginia Mayo

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
May 2015

Approved by

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Advisor: Lecturer Robin Street

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Reader: Professor Scott Fiene

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Reader: Doctor James Lumpp

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## DEDICATION

For my dad, whose ideas and advice inspired me to write this thesis.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

VIRGINIA MAYO: An examination of crisis communications at major Mississippi universities.

(Under the direction of Robin Street)

This thesis will examine current theory in how to prepare for, handle and communicate in a crisis supported by extensive research. The first chapter includes case studies from other college campuses, the importance of a crisis management plan, and dealing with the media in crisis situations. Next, the crisis communications theories will be applied to three major Mississippi universities through examination from interviews and the study of past crises at these universities. Interviews were conducted via email and in person, depending on the location of the school. The three Mississippi universities examined are The University of Southern Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and The University of Mississippi. At each school, the communications director was interviewed regarding significant crises of the past five to ten years. For The University of Mississippi, in addition to interviewing the current communications director, past directors were also interviewed for a more extensive look into crisis communications at Ole Miss.

In their individual school histories, each of these schools has experienced major crises, which have damaged or challenged the university's reputation in the eyes of its publics. During all crises discussed, each university communicated and handled their crises in different manners depending on the scope of the particular situation. Each school will be analyzed and critiqued in reference to the crisis communications research.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS.....	1
CHAPTER TWO: THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI.....	17
CHAPTER THREE: MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY.....	26
CHAPTER FOUR: THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI.....	36
SUBCHAPTER ONE: THE MEREDITH CRISIS.....	37
SUBCHAPTER TWO: THE MEEK ERA.....	42
SUBCHAPTER THREE: THE ALFORD ERA.....	46
SUBCHAPTER FOUR: THE BLANTON ERA.....	54
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	64
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	67

## **Chapter One: Introduction to Crisis Communications**

This thesis will begin by examining current theory in how to prepare for, handle and communicate in a crisis situation. This chapter includes examples of crises from two college campuses, as well as research on crisis management, how to handle mass and social media, and how to approach rumors via social media during a crisis.

Next, this theory will be applied to three Mississippi universities: The University of Southern Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and The University of Mississippi. Through personal interviews each chapter will examine crises on these three college campuses, while applying current crisis communications theory to each situation. Each situation will be evaluated on how current theory was practiced and the positive or negative effect of the public relations efforts.

The public relations field contains several different areas of practice, including media relations, internal relations, community relations, consumer relations, and special publics. Another area of the field, which this thesis will exclusively examine, is crisis communications. All organizations face the risk of encountering a crisis, and the way in which an organization handles said crisis determines its future reputation and success.

In her text, Kathleen Fearn-Banks (2007) defines “crisis” as “a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name” (p. 8). Fearn-Banks (2007) also distinguishes a “crisis” from a “problem.”



“The term *crisis* denotes something more serious than a ‘problem.’ Public relations people deal with problems—solving them or avoiding them. By definition, however, a crisis interrupts the normal flow of business, so a crisis cannot be a normal part of this flow...In a crisis, in contrast to a problem, emotions are on edge, brains are not fully functioning, and events are occurring so rapidly that drafting a plan during a crisis is unthinkable.” (p. 8-9)

Crises can occur in any and all organizations, regardless of size; however colleges and universities are very susceptible to crises, especially at larger institutions. This paper will focus on the communications efforts during crises on college campuses.

According to *Campus Crisis Management* (2007), “over the past fifty years as advances in technology have expanded the reach of televised media and communications, campus tragedies have become more prominent in our lives, regardless of where they occur” (p. 6). The more information gathered from campus crises allows other schools to better plan and prepare for possible crisis scenarios on their own campuses.

In this chapter, two case studies from college campuses will be examined to provide context on how crises vary on college campuses, as well as how different crises require different communications skills. The two universities examined are Texas A&M University (1999) and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University or “Virginia Tech” (2007).

The first example is of a crisis communications effort that experienced issues with its execution. The annual Bonfire held at Texas A&M University was a unique tradition on a college campus. The bonfire was held during the week prior to the football game against A&M’s rival, The University of Texas. “Hundreds of students would organize

into highly structured units to share in the honor of participating in a ninety-year-old tradition” (Zdziarski, Dunkel, & Rollo, 2007, p. 17).

According to *Campus Crisis Management* (2007), risk management reviews provided by the university prove that preparations were made for the safety of students who were to attend the bonfire (p.17). Despite safety efforts made, however, a crisis ensued. “In the early morning of November 18, 1999, all the planning and careful preparation by generations of students, faculty, and staff came crashing down when twelve individuals lost their lives in the tangle of logs that had been the Bonfire construction site” (Zdziarski et al., 2007, p. 17).

Although technology in 1999 was not as innovative as today, the ease of communication amongst students at the university challenged communications efforts during this tragedy. Due to the public location of the accident and the use of cellphones and email, information regarding the injured and deceased was released to the media before the students’ kin were notified. Outside media affected the institution’s ability to respond in an effective and timely manner (Zdziarski et al., 2007, p.17). Texas A&M’s inability to communicate and establish itself as the leader of information significantly harmed the university’s reputation and credibility during this crisis.

The second example took place on April 16, 2007, when a senior at Virginia Tech killed 32 students and instructors in a shooting rampage before taking his own life. Prior to this tragedy the Virginia Tech Division of Student Affairs provided examples of what they deemed as a crisis. This definition is from their crisis management plan:

“Crisis includes the following situations:

1. Death of Student

2. Serious (life-threatening) injury or illness of a student
3. Any situation in which a parent or news reporter is already involved or will be the next day
4. Any situation which requires immediate action by the Dean of Students' on-call staff member
5. Any emergency which is clearly out of normal limits" (Zdziarski et al., 2007, p. 29)

The 2007 events at Virginia Tech, often called Higher Education's 9/11, "altered the manner in which we [universities] now must prepare for each new year, especially with regard to recognizing and addressing the behaviors of at-risk students" (Rinehart, 2007). Three panel reports relating to the tragedy were conducted following the Virginia Tech shooting, each identifying factors that led to the tragic event and the mental instability of the shooter. The Virginia Tech incident serves as a case study and example to learning institutions across the country.

Since the incident, Virginia Tech has updated its crisis management plan, most recently in 2012. Other American universities and colleges have also altered their crisis management plans in response to this tragic event. The Virginia Tech shooting was also one of the first university crises to face the issues social media presents to communicating during a crisis. This will be discussed later in the chapter. Next, this thesis will discuss current communications theories supported by extensive research by various authors.

## **Crisis Management**

The above incidences, along with hundreds of other university crises, produce highly stressful situations. In order to alleviate stress during a crisis and prepare for the unexpected, organizations practice crisis management. “*Crisis management* is a process of strategic planning for a crisis or negative turning point, a process that removes some of the risk and uncertainty from the negative occurrence and thereby allows the organization to be in greater control of its own destiny” (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 9).

An aspect of crisis management includes crisis communications, which is “the dialog between the organization and its public prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence” (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 9). In order for crisis management to be effective, crisis communications should not only “alleviate or eliminate the crisis,” but also “bring the organization a more positive reputation than it had before the crisis” (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 9).

According to Fearn-Banks (2007), “research shows that companies with a crisis management and/or crisis communications plan come out of a crisis with a more positive image than companies without such a plan” (p. 9-10). A crisis management/crisis communications plan is necessary for all organizations regardless of size. Without a guide to follow when a crisis occurs, the situation becomes chaotic and often leaves the organization and its publics in a state of confusion.

Naturally crisis communications is a reactive practice, since crises are unplanned events; however, plans for handling and communicating in crises are often in place. The spontaneous nature of a crisis makes it completely impossible to fully prepare for all emergency situations. Although emergency communication is reactive, emergency

planning must be proactive. “The public relations staff must monitor trends and detect potential issues to anticipate and prepare for issues that may explode into the public agenda” (Hayes, Hendrix, & Kumar, 2013, p. 346).

There are two important steps in planning for a crisis: creating a crisis management team and creating a crisis management plan. “An important part of the crisis management strategy is the creation of a team of people who are charged with the task of handling the response in an actual crisis situation” (Zdziarski, et al., 2007, p. 56). The crisis management team on college campuses consists of campus staff in leadership roles or with communications responsibilities. Generally, “the chief administrative officer or the chief students affairs officer” leads the crisis management team (Zdziarski et al., 2007, p. 65). The tasks and duties of the teams should be clearly defined in order to avoid confusion during the event of a crisis. “To achieve these goals, team members need a clear understanding of their jurisdiction and authority, the protocol for activating the team, and the initial activities involved in managing any crisis” (Zdziarski et al., 2007, 64-65). The crisis management team should communicate on a regular basis so their priorities and responsibilities remain clear and aligned.

Zdziarski (2007) lists examples of basic responsibilities:

- “Developing precrisis contingency guidelines
- Gathering critical incident information
- Analyzing crisis information
- Developing crisis management strategies
- Making crisis management decisions
- Communicating with campus and community

- Reporting to the president” (p. 65)

The effectiveness and efficiency of the crisis is dependent on the clearness of responsibility among its team members. In order for the crisis management team to do a successful job, there must be a crisis management plan, which details the proper procedure in a crisis.

One of the first tasks a new staff undertakes is a crisis management plan. These plans change over time as the nature of the campus changes and as new incidences occur; however, some form of a written plan should exist. According to Zdziarski’s (2007) study in 2001, 85 percent of universities surveyed had some form of a crisis management plan (p. 74). “The existence of a written crisis management plan is perhaps the single most important crisis management tool a campus can have” (Zdziarski et al., 2007, p. 74).

Before the construction of a crisis management plan, campuses must consider potential threats and risks. These potential situations can be internal or external to the campus environments (Zdziarski et al., 2007, p. 75). The types of crises along with the potential intensity and impact of the crises should be considered. Darrel Hayes, Jerry Hendrix and Pallavi Kumar (2013) term this proactive practice as “client research.” They believe this client research should prepare as many “worst-case” scenarios as possible (p. 345). Planning for these scenarios may alleviate the impact of the situations when and if they occur. Hayes (2013) states “all division heads in the organization should be asked by the director of public relations to prepare a list of potential trouble spots that could erupt in their respective areas” (p. 345).

After establishing and planning for possible threats, the plan is constructed. Zdziarski (2007) says a good crisis management plan has two components: a basic plan

and a set of crisis protocols (p. 78). “A basic plan outlines the general process and procedures for how a campus will respond in the event of a crisis, regardless of its nature” (Zdziarski et al., 2007, p. 78). This outline includes the purpose of a crisis plan, how the plan should be activated, the lines of authority during a crisis, and the steps to be taken (Zdziarski et al., 2007, p. 78-81).

The second component of a crisis management plan is a set of crisis protocols, which identify necessary procedures in specific situations. “These protocols denote the who, what, when, and where of institutional response efforts to these particular events” (Zdziarski et al., 2007, p. 82). This set of protocols resembles a step-by-step account of the actions that could take place during a specific crisis. Some crises can be foreshadowed and detailed in a crisis management plan, but it is impossible to prepare for every possible incident. “Crisis protocols should address the crisis events that have the greatest probability of occurring on a campus or that would have the greatest impact on the campus” (Zdziarski et al., 2007, p. 82).

Chapter Two through Chapter Four will examine crisis management plans on three major Mississippi universities and how those plans were applied during crises. Each university, depending on their school history, environment and size has developed a plan to prevent crises on their campuses most efficiently. The remainder of this chapter covers research regarding external communication and handling rumors during crises.

## **Communicating with the Organization's Publics in a Crisis Through Mass Media and Social Media**

In stressful situations, people desperately seek answers and often believe the first piece of information thrown at them, regardless of what the information is and where it is coming from. Public opinion becomes truth before facts and sources are checked.

According to Fearn-Banks (2007), “an organization in crisis must prove to its publics, and often to the general public, that the prevailing negative opinion is not factual” (p. 15).

There are several factors that form a person's public opinion, many of which are predetermined and uncontrollable. “These attitudes are based on age, educational level, religion, country, state, city, neighborhood, family background and traditions, social class, and racial background” (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 15). In regards to public opinion, public relations' goal is to “reinforce positive attitudes, change negative attitudes, and provide information in a way that causes the unopinionated and neutral to form the opinion most conducive to the organization's function” (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 15). In order to direct a public's opinion in a positive direction, public relations officials must handle a crisis with immediacy.

A crisis is thrust upon an organization, often with little or no warning, and dealing with the crisis in a proactive manner is necessary for the future reputation of that organization. Fearn-Banks (2007) believes “a crisis ignored is an organization failing” (p. 16). Waiting for a crisis to dissolve will benefit the organization in no way; taking action is mandatory to maintain, restore, or create positive public opinion.

The promptness of the release of information is just as important as the truthfulness of the information. Zdziarski (2007) states “the speed with which an



institution responds to a crisis by disseminating critical information to its various target audiences can become to primary factor in whether or not the institution is perceived as managing the crisis well” (p. 97). The sooner information is released, the less time publics have to form distrust with the institution or base their perceptions on rumors or assumptions. In a crisis situation, tensions run high for the target publics, so not knowing information causes doubt and suspicion in their minds. If an institution remains silent and waits for the crisis to dissolve, publics will perceive this as guilt or dishonesty. “If target audiences *think* there is no response to a particular crisis, then perceptually, there is no response” (Zdziarski et al., 2007, p. 97). During a crisis, no news is *bad* news.

It is also important to know who the university’s publics are, so that at the time of a crisis, these people can be efficiently reached. Hayes (2007) suggests that public relations practitioners list internal and external audiences in their crisis plan, which should be the “starting point” of communicating during a crisis (p. 346). For colleges and universities, the internal and external publics are large in number. Some of the important audiences Zdziarski (2007) lists are:

- “Students (current, former, and prospective) and their parents
- Staff/Faculty
- Donors (current and prospective)
- Relatives and friends of victims
- Media (print, radio, television, and Web, including bloggers)
- Partners and stakeholders
- The general public” (p. 98-99)

The contact lists should be more specific to each university, but most will include all or some of the above audiences.

The way in which an organization releases its information can affect how the public perceives the situation. There are several guidelines public relations professionals should follow in order to create a positive outcome for the organization. “The news media can reach the masses in a short period of time because most Americans utilize some form of the news media, primarily television” (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 16).

In order for a public relations person to be successful, he or she must be skilled at contacting the media. According to Fearn-Banks (2007), public relations people must know “how to reach the media, when and how to call a news conference, when and how to conduct one-on-one interviews, and when and how to disseminate written material” (p. 16).

To ensure cooperation between the institution and the media, the university’s communications team should inform the media on how the communication process will work during a crisis *prior* to the occurrence of the crisis. “Media need to know ahead of time how the flow of information will work in a crisis, whom they need to contact to get their questions answered, and what the university’s media relations team can or cannot do for them” (Zdziarski et al., 2007, p. 107). By anticipating the needs of the media, the institution achieves its communications goals in three ways: “informing all of its target audiences simultaneously, helping the media understand the actions being taken by the university, and gaining media acceptance—and even support—for the institution’s response and recovery efforts” (Zdziarski et al., 2007, p. 107).

Zdziarski (2007) claims one of the most effective methods of communicating with the media during a crisis is through an equal access website (p. 107). The information on the website should be posted at the same time the information is given to the media. Some organizations prepare a hidden website that is activated only during a crisis. “The sites provide additional background material and interactive features to handle exchanges with both the media and the publics most affected by the crisis” (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 350). Other ways to communicate with the media include: press statements and press releases, press conferences, video news releases (VNRs), webcasts, and email listservs (Zdziarski, 2007).

Another important rule when dealing with the media during a crisis is to avoid answering with “no comment.” To the public, “refusing to comment appears to be an admission of hiding information or even guilt” (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p.23). Honesty is the first step in winning back the trust of the public, so it is wise for an organization to be upfront about their error or mistake and to publish that statement shortly after the crisis has occurred. The sooner the media receives the truth, the sooner they will publish these facts, therefore informing the organization’s publics. The media seeks answers to specific questions like, what happened, were there any deaths, and what is being done about it. The responses from the organization are important for holding its public’s trust. Fearn-Banks (2007) suggests three types of responses to a media request:

1. “We know and here’s all the information.
2. We don’t know everything at this time. Here’s what we know. We’ll find out more and let you know.
3. We have no idea, but we’ll find out and tell you.” (p. 25)

The organization should assign one individual from within the organization to serve as the spokesperson for the duration of the crisis. The spokesperson should be of high credibility and alternates should be chosen in advance (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 350). This spokesperson should be the primary source of information from the organization to the media and the publics. The spokesperson ensures the consistency and accuracy of the messages emitted from the organization. “Designating one primary spokesperson reduces the possibility of conflicting statements, organization values, or explanations being released to the media” (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 25). Fearn-Banks (2007) recommends that the public relations officials at an organization not serve as spokesperson during a crisis. Instead the CEO or president of a company is considered ideal. “The CEO is considered by most public relations professionals to be the spokesperson of choice during a crisis, especially if people have been injured, if there is danger or physical harm, or if there are millions of dollars in damage” (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 25).

Universities have some control over what information regarding their crisis is given to the media; however false information, like rumor, is easily transmitted to the publics. The use of social media has significantly heightened the spread of rumors.

### **Rumors and Social Media During a Crisis**

During a crisis, rumors are inevitable, especially with today’s technology and the ability to instantly communicate via social media. Since rumors are often negative and untrue, they can be exceptionally damaging to a company’s reputation. During an emergency situation rumors run rampant as people try to quickly publish information

before fact checking. Within minutes, rumors are capable of destroying a company's credibility, and much work is required to reverse the negative image bestowed upon the organization. Fearn-Banks (2007) states three unique problems that arise when dealing with rumors:

1. "You usually have no idea how the rumor started—was it an irate customer, a competitor, a person with nothing better to do or someone's conversation that was merely misunderstood?
2. You usually have no idea how widespread the rumor is or how long it has been circulating.
3. You have to determine carefully whether it is best to ignore the rumor or fight it—will fighting the rumor spread it more than leaving it alone?" (p. 79)

The starts of many crises are rumors. "In fact, a crisis can actually be a negative rumor" (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 80). Rumors can be intentional or accidental, so tracing the start of a rumor is impossible at times. The presence of rumors in crisis situations is heightened today due to the constant use of social media.

While social media is highly responsible for spreading rumors, it can also be used in positive ways to reach an institution's targets during a crisis. According to Ronald Williamson and J. Howard Johnston (2012), social media helps university leaders "communicate effectively and respond more quickly during a crisis" (p. 53). Social media can also serve as a monitoring device, which allows schools to anticipate a crisis (Williamson & Johnston, 2012, p. 53).

Terri Howard and Ralph Metzner (as cited in Williamson & Johnston, 2012) identify three challenges, which social media, like Facebook and Twitter, have thrust

upon colleges and universities. The three challenges include: increased speed, pervasive inaccuracies, and demand for hyper-transparency.

With increased speed, social media sites are more likely to reveal information before a traditional news media outlet. “Students using social media may communicate with their families far more quickly than the school can provide information” (Williamson & Johnston, 2012, p. 57). Pervasive inaccuracies occur due to the speed and access of social media. It is nearly impossible to monitor the accuracy of all social media posts pertaining to a campus crisis. This adds another task for the crisis management team. According to Howard and Metzner (as cited in Williamson & Johnston, 2012), “schools must now manage the response to false rumors or false facts shared via social media” (p. 57). Howard and Metzner believe the third challenge, the demand for hyper-transparency, may be the biggest impact of social media on a school’s crisis response (Williamson & Johnston, 2012, p. 57). Hyper-transparency refers to the idea that social media users believe they know everything regarding the incidents they post about during a crisis. Social media gives users the ability to create their own news, regardless of the validity and factualness, which makes information extremely difficult to control.

According to Williamson and Johnston (2012), “the emergence of social media means that you can’t control the messages any longer” (p. 59). With smartphones and apps like Twitter and Facebook verbal *and* visual accounts of the crisis can be posted in a matter of minutes, even seconds. Virginia Tech dealt with this issue during the shooting crisis in 2007. The university’s immediate reaction to the tragedy was to focus on the safety of its faculty, staff and students, which was necessary for the well being of the school. In the meantime, however, “images of the disaster were quickly disseminated

and, in a very short time, more than a thousand journalists overran the campus” (Williamson & Johnston, 2007, p. 59).

Not only does social media spread rumors, it also is the source of rumors. Rumors “can be spread via texts, Twitter, or Facebook and can quickly overwhelm a school’s ability to respond (Williamson & Johnston, 2007, p. 59). The National School of Public Relations Association (cited in Williamson and Johnston, 2007) explains approaches for dealing with rumors in a crisis (p.59). Some of these include: get timely and accurate information to key audiences, ensure publics know the rumors are being addressed, and get specific details of the rumor from other parties. Universities must plug rumors as quickly as possible in order to stop them from spreading and inform publics of the truth.

All crisis communications theory discussed in this chapter is a useful guideline for university communications professionals. Although crises are circumstantial and unique, the theories discussed provide a solid guideline for all crisis situations on college campuses.

The remaining chapters in this thesis will examine three major Mississippi universities and crises that have occurred on these campuses. Because this author had unique access to the University of Mississippi officials, that campus will be examined in the most detail. Specifically, the chapters will cover the communication plans at each university, the crises that have occurred on each university, and an evaluation of how the crisis was handled in comparison to the current crisis communication theories.

## **Chapter Two: The University of Southern Mississippi**

### **Information on Public Relations Professional Interviewed**

The first university discussed is The University of Southern Mississippi. In a series of interviews with James “Jim” Coll, Chief Communication Officer at The University of Southern Mississippi, commonly called “Southern Miss,” he explains the university’s crisis communications plan and how the plan was executed in an emergency weather situation on the Southern Miss campus. Coll has served his position at Southern Miss since December of 2010. Coll is responsible for “providing the overall leadership and management of the marketing and public relations functions of the university, including public information, advertising campaigns, interaction with members of the media, and branding” (Taylor, 2010). A seven-person executive communication staff works under Coll’s guidance. Coll, a Southern Miss graduate, has served on the Southern Miss Alumni Association staff since 2004. In his previous position he “was responsible for all components of the development and production of the organization’s publications, including its website, SouthernMissAlumni.com, and its quarterly magazine, *The Talon*,” which “was named the top institutional magazine in the state by the College of Public Relations” (Taylor, 2012).

Since Coll has worked at Southern Miss for less than five years, the former communications chair at the university was also contacted for potential information regarding crises that may have occurred prior to Coll’s administration. However, she did



not reply, resulting in a condensed collection of case studies and information in this chapter.

### **The University of Southern Mississippi Crisis Plan**

The University of Southern Mississippi has an installed crisis plan, The Emergency Incident Response Plan, that details recommended responses in nine different types of crisis situations. The plan lists “two general types of emergency incidents that may result in the implementation of this plan” (Emergency Incident Response Plan). One is a large-scale disorder and the other is a large-scale natural/man-made disaster. The response plan also states that “since an emergency may be sudden and without warning, these procedures are designed to be flexible in order to accommodate contingencies of various types and magnitudes” (Emergency Incident Response Plan). Some of the possible crisis situations at Southern Miss include “weather-related emergencies, violence on campus, and a change in university leadership,” said Coll.

For each situation, spokespeople are identified and contact information for key interest groups and message templates are included. Coll said the plan helps to ensure in each situation the university responds consistently and avoid overlooking details in a high-pressure situation.

There is a specific section in the plan titled “Media Relations During an Emergency Incident.” This section states:

“Any incident, whether minor or major, has the potential of creating a communications crisis if the facts are improperly conveyed to news media or if an information vacuum is created that forces reporters to seek out unauthorized

sources for comment. The Department of Marketing and Public Relations should be notified as soon as the threat of an emergency is determined. Media representatives may arrive on campus as the emergency is occurring...Photographer and videographers should not be barred from taking pictures at the scene of the emergency, as long as they remain out of harm's way and do not interfere with emergency response operations" (Emergency Incident Response Plan)

### **Communications Plan for Crises**

Having a mass and/or online media relations plan is also part of crisis planning. In the communications section of the Southern Miss crisis plan, six rules are listed for media relations to follow in an emergency situation. A brief version of the list is as follows:

1. "Only the authorized spokesperson will meet or talk with the media.
2. Only factual information will be released; there will be no speculation or comment on hypothetical situations.
3. All executive and supervisory personnel will be notified to report emergencies to the president or spokesperson.
4. The president, other senior administrators, and the University Relations spokesperson should be informed immediately of existing emergencies or the impending threat of emergencies.

5. The Emergency Administration Team and all other necessary parties will meet and decide on the appropriate course of action, including what is to be released to the media.
6. All calls from the media should be referred directly to University Relations” (Emergency Incident Response Plan)

The Southern Miss crisis plan also lists the members of the communications team. The communications team holds responsibility for emitting messages through specific channels during a crisis. The communications team consists of the following:

- Social Media Specialist: posts to various university accounts throughout the response, monitors these sites, and responds as appropriate
- Director of Web Services: posts to the main university website and southernmiss.info, the university’s emergency information site
- New and Media Relations staff (two people): field requests from news media and arrange interviews, distribute press releases and media alerts
- Spokespeople (three to four assigned people): serve as subjects of media interviews
- Chief Communication Officer: posts Eagle Alerts, posts to social media sites, responds to media inquiries, provides talking points for spokespeople
- Video production staff (two people): shoots and edits video throughout the response

No situation is the same, however, so the plan deviates from its original protocol depending on the individual crisis. “For instance, the appointed spokesperson may not be

available at the time, and, as a result, a secondary spokesperson would be used,” said Coll. This was the case during an emergency weather situation at Southern Miss, and Coll and his staff were forced to accommodate with the unusual circumstances.

### **Crisis: Tornado Damage to The University of Southern Mississippi**

In February of 2013, a tornado hit Hattiesburg, Mississippi, home of The University of Southern Mississippi. According to an article published in *USA Today*, the tornado caused major damage and injured at least sixty people in the Hattiesburg area (Welch, Richardson, & Rice, 2013). The Southern Miss campus was one of the most affected areas in Hattiesburg. “The university released a statement saying several buildings had been damaged, but no injuries were reported” (Welch et al., 2013). Campus police declared the situation a state of emergency and took precautionary measures to keep others off the Southern Miss campus.

“Moments after the tornado struck the Hattiesburg campus, University Communications staff members were among the first on the scene, communicating emergency information to the University’s nearly 20,000 faculty, staff and students, 90,000 alumni, and millions of others across the country,” said Coll. Martha Dunagin Saunders, who served as Southern Miss president from 2007-2012, had stepped down in July of 2012 and was replaced with interim president Dr. Aubrey Keith Lucas. The crisis communications plan calls for the president to serve as spokesperson. At the time of the catastrophe, both Dr. Lucas and incoming president, Rodney D. Bennett, were out of the state. Thus, the designated spokesperson was not available. As they “hastily returned to the University, others had to initially speak on behalf of the University at times,” said

Coll. Southern Miss Vice President for Student Affairs, Joe Paul, served as spokesperson during a press conference on the night of the tornado.

According to Coll, five communication channels were used for communication efforts during the tornado crisis, and more than 150 messages were produced via these channels. The five channels the communication team used in the crisis includes:

- Eagle Alert: the University's emergency communication system, which delivers text and phone messages and emails to faculty, staff and students
- Social Media: the University's Facebook page reaches more than 40,000 people and Twitter reaches approximately 7,000 through accounts @SouthernMiss and @SouthernMissNow
- SouthernMiss.info: the University's emergency communication website on which the latest emergency notices are posted and archives of emergency messages are kept for reference
- Media Relations: University officials participated in dozens of interviews and hundreds of news stories helped to better inform the public, including key stakeholders. News outlets included CBS, ABC, CNN and more. A press conference was held on the night of the tornado. The university released a press release encouraging people not on campus to stay away.
- Usm.edu: the University's primary web presence also contained the latest information

The SouthernMiss.info website is live at all times and updated when different issues occur. For example, on January 31, 2015, Coll posted information about a

burglary, that took place close to the Southern Miss campus. Weather safety plans and weather resource links are available on the website at all times for student use.

In order to reach specific interest groups that had been affected by the tornado, deans, coaches, department chairs and others provided specific information to those interest groups via email and social media.

When evaluating the tornado crisis and the efforts of the University of Southern Mississippi communications department, Coll believes four communications objectives were set and achieved. The four objectives include:

- Communicated emergency information
- Positioned the new University President as a trusted leader
- Demonstrated the scope of the response/instilled confidence in Southern Miss
- Connected the University's response to the Southern Miss brand, of which resiliency, determination and hard work are treasured characteristics

Coll believes the tornado situation in Hattiesburg was the first major crisis in which social media played a role as a communication channel. "I feel like this particular situation was the first major crisis in which we learned the full potential of social media as a communication channel during a crisis" said Coll. Since the tornado crisis in 2013, the Southern Miss communications staff has worked to develop a crisis communication plan in which social media is fully incorporated.

## **Evaluation**

This section will evaluate the plan and crisis work of the university in comparison to the recommendations discussed in the first chapter. In reference to Fearn-Banks (2007) statement that companies with a crisis plan come out of a crisis with a more positive reputation than companies without a plan, Jim Coll and his team proved this to be true (p. 9-10).

As Hayes, Hendrix, and Kumar suggest, the public relations staff at Southern Miss identified potential threats to their campus and prepared for these issues as best they could. Not only does Southern Miss have an emergency response plan, they also have a crisis team. The team members and their perspective duties listed earlier in the chapter, demonstrate Zdziarski's (2007) idea that to achieve any communications goal in any situation "team members need a clear understanding of their jurisdiction and authority" (p. 64). The jurisdiction and authority of the Southern Miss communications team is clearly established in the Emergency Incident Response Plan. The tasks of the communications team were clearly lined up, so that every member could do his or her part in quickly emitting information to the university's publics. The channels of communication were established ahead of time and all channels were used in reaching specific targets and informing them of the disaster in Hattiesburg and on the Southern Miss campus.

Coll and the Southern Miss communications team also effectively used social media to "communicate effectively and respond more quickly during a crisis" as Williamson and Johnston (2012) suggest. In Coll's interview he listed four strong objectives met by the communications team during the tornado crisis in 2013.

One flaw in the execution of crisis communications during this situation pertains to the spokespeople. During the tornado situation, there should have been a more established backup. In his interview, Coll mentioned that several others had to fill in as spokespeople, one being Joe Paul, Vice President for Student Affairs. Paul spoke at a press conference on the night of the tornado. Information from this point on would have been more consistent and unified if Paul continued as the single spokesperson until one of the two presidents was available. This aspect of crisis communication during the tornado defies current crisis communication theory written by Hayes and colleagues. Hayes's (2007) theory states that there should be one key spokesperson and alternates should be chosen in advance (p. 350). The University of Southern Mississippi failed in the aspect of creating one, solid voice during this crisis.



## **Chapter Three: Mississippi State University**

### **Information on Public Relations Professional Interviewed**

Mississippi State University (MSU) is the second major Mississippi school this thesis will examine. Sidney “Sid” Salter currently serves as Chief Communications Officer in the Office of Public Affairs at MSU. The Office of Public Affairs “serves as MSU’s print, broadcast and multimedia newsroom, social media platform, strategic marketing and advertising agency, photography and videography studio, and graphic design operations” (Office of Public Affairs). Prior to the position as Director of Public Affairs, Salter worked as a political columnist for more than thirty years. He also served as the publisher and editor of the *Scott County Times* in Forest, Mississippi, followed by working as Perspective Editor at the *The Clarion Ledger* of Jackson, Mississippi. Salter is “a two-time winner of the J. Oliver Emmerich Editorial Excellence Award, considered the premium honor of the Mississippi Press Association” (Office of Public Affairs).

In a series of interviews, Salter explains that most crises encountered on the MSU campus are matters of student safety caused by weather or other influences; however, in the past five years, Mississippi State University encountered one more serious problem, which will be examined in this chapter.

## **Mississippi State University Crisis Plan**

According to Salter, an Incident Preparedness Plan (IPP) is in place at Mississippi State University and is “used as a guide for protecting lives and property, and quickly restoring conditions to normal in an organized fashion” (Incident Preparedness Plan). It is the responsibility of the MSU Vice President for Student Affairs to review the Emergency Operations Plan “every four years or as needed” in order to keep the IPP up-to-date and relevant to situations occurring on the MSU campus (Emergency Operations Policy, 2014).

A feature of the Incident Preparedness Plan is the Maroon (the school color) Alert Communications System. The emergency system has several devices to ensure the most efficient communication to students at the university. Some of these devices include:

- “Emergency Information website for up to date information
- Telephone HOT LINE activated only during emergencies
- Text messaging to cell phones—students must be signed up
- Instant Messaging—must download and install GroupWise Messenger
- Mobile loudspeakers
- Email—when a longer notification delay is acceptable
- Social Media—the use of MSU’s Facebook and Twitter accounts”

(Incident Preparedness Plan)

Another aspect of the IPP is a Crisis Action Team (CAT), whose members receive unrestricted access on the MSU campus during emergencies. In necessary circumstances, “the on call Crisis Action Team leader will activate the Crisis Action Team” (Incident Preparedness Plan). Members of CAT report to the Incident Command Center located in

Butler-Williams Building conference room or Longest Student Health Center, a secondary location. “The Incident Command Center will serve as a specific facility for communications, information coordination, and meetings during emergency operations” (Incident Preparedness Plan).

In addition to detailing information about Maroon Alert and the Crisis Action Team, the IPP also lists possible emergencies Mississippi State University should prepare for and how each situation should be handled. The plan states, “it is impractical to outline the specific emergency procedures to follow for every contingency,” but the plan does provide basic guidelines necessary for common emergency situations (Incident Preparedness Plan). The possible emergencies in which plans are established include but are not limited to: on campus fires, medical emergencies, utility failures, bomb threats, hostage situations, civil disorders and weather related emergencies (Incident Preparedness Plan).

While the IPP does not prevent crises from occurring, Salter believes the plan has lessened the impact of the crises that develop. “The university is indeed prepared and the plan guides us to make better decisions in a more expedient manner,” said Salter. The MSU crises have provided Salter and the communications team with valuable feedback to help improve the IPP. Salter said he has learned that the key to responding to crises is to know the identities of the people who are the first and best responders to any given situation on the MSU campus, the location of the equipment of the tools or systems necessary to make an efficient response and redundant contact information for the responders.

## **Crisis: Shooting at Evans Hall**

Unfortunately, Salter and the MSU team were able to put their crisis plans into actions in three incidences. In the first incident, a student was shot and killed on campus. At approximately 10:00 p.m. on March 24, 2012, Mississippi State University police were notified of an incident in Evans Hall, a male residence hall on the Mississippi State campus. The MSU Police Department responded immediately and “arrived at the scene within one minute” of receiving the emergency call (Katrandjian, 2012). University police found “a male student with what appeared to be serious injuries,” said Salter. Salter said that the student was transported to Oktibbeha County Hospital, where he was identified as 21-year-old John Sanderson of Madison, Mississippi. Salter recalls Sanderson dying thirty minutes upon his arrival at the hospital.

“For the first time in the history of MSU, a student was shot and killed on campus,” said Salter. Immediately, the MSU Crisis Action Team convened and began monitoring developments and coordinating a response. Salter said,

“Our MSU Police Department stepped up patrols, assisted by officers from the City of Starkville and the Oktibbeha County Sheriff’s Office. Throughout the night and into the next morning, the campus was informed of developments through our Maroon Alert emergency notification system.”

In addition to action taken by the Crisis Action Team, the Incident Preparedness Plan was referenced in how to deal with the immediate safety of MSU students. The plan outlines the proper protocol for violence or weapon threats:

1. “If someone enters a building with a weapon or acts violently, report it to the MSU police immediately at 325-2121 or 911

2. Should gunfire or explosives discharge, take cover immediately and stay there.” (Incident Preparedness Plan)

The university handled the shooting at Evans Hall through a press conference and press releases. “We utilized the Maroon Alert System during the event to communicate with students, faculty and staff,” said Salter. Salter said there was not a lot of social media used during this crisis, but they “sought to control the messaging pretty tightly as an institution.” Dr. Mark Keenum, President of Mississippi State University, visited Evans Hall and met personally with residents to reassure them during this frightening situation.

Since the event, the MSU Police Department has been working with a national network of law enforcement to discover who is responsible for the death of the student. “Three suspects were charged with capital murder in the incident with arrests coming from Memphis, Tennessee, Gainesville, Florida, and Jackson, Mississippi,” said Salter. The crisis communications efforts continue until all loose ends are tied.

### **Crisis: Dormitory Emergency Incidences**

In a more recent crisis on the MSU campus, Starkville, Mississippi experienced sub-freezing temperatures in January of 2014. These low temperatures caused fire suppressions systems in Ruby and Magnolia Halls to freeze and produce water damage to a substantial portion of Ruby Hall in the process. According to Salter, the water damage resulted in displaced students and significant property damage, as well as inquiries from concerned parents and family members of impacted students. Bill Kibler, MSU Vice

President for Student Affairs, stated, “approximately 120 students will be impacted” (News Bureau, January 8, 2014).

In response to the student safety crisis, “Kibler said the university began contacting individual students on Tuesday afternoon to advise them of the weather related damage and to inform them of available options” (News Bureau, January 8, 2014). Following the MSU Incident Preparedness Plan, as soon as the damage was discovered the facilities were aggressively secured by launching “an appropriate environmental mitigation response” (News Bureau, January 8, 2014).

Salter also issued a statement to the media, which said “the university was continuing to monitor the potential impact of the single-digit temperatures on the more than 700 buildings in MSU’s statewide infrastructure but that it appeared the three residence halls were the only buildings with damage from the frigid temperatures” (News Bureau, January 8, 2014).

Another incident in which a fire suppression system caused water damage occurred in Oak Hall on the MSU campus. A student left a candle burning in a residence hall room and the fire set off the system when a futon caught fire. In reference to the Incident Preparedness Plan, the basic guidelines for emergencies involving a fire were followed. The protocol for fire includes:

1. “Pull the fire pull station to notify others.
2. Evacuate the building.
3. Call “911” from a cell phone or another building.
4. Move away from the area so emergency personnel can do their job.

5. Do not go back into the building for any reason, until given permission by the responding authorities.” (Incident Preparedness Plan)

The water damage from the fire suppression system displaced Oak Hall residents for several weeks. According to an article published by the MSU News Bureau on October 5, 2014, the fire displaced 198 female student residents of Oak Hall, but no injuries were reported. To respond to the incident and alleviate chaos, MSU President Mark Keenum “joined the university’s Crisis Action Team in the immediate planning for the university’s reaction to the event, then left to visit with students displaced by the fire” (News Bureau, October 5, 2014). Keenum, who served as spokesperson for this particular crisis, said,

“We’re actively engaged in doing everything possible to help these students deal with this very stressful event. Our first responsibility is to help these students to get safe, comfortable housing tonight. Then we want to quickly get them placed in more permanent housing until repairs can be made to the residence hall. We are also making academic allowances in the form of excused absences, if necessary, for impacted students.” (News Bureau, October 5, 2014)

MSU followed standard crisis communications procedure by reporting only fact-checked information and assuming nothing about the situation. Salter responded, “We will have more details for the media tomorrow, but this is about the extent of the information we can make available tonight” (News Bureau, October 5, 2014).

The Ruby and Magnolia Hall situations were handled through press releases, individual interviews with media members, social media, Maroon Alert, and phone responses and emails with students and their parents. For the Oak Hall incident, which

was of shorter duration and less impactful, social media was used extensively, but there were press releases and media interviews conducted, as well.

## **Evaluation**

Mississippi State University followed current crisis communications theory in several different ways in all three of the crisis situations mentioned above. To start, MSU developed a crisis management plan, called the Incident Preparedness Plan, which Zdziarski (2007) states is one of the most important tools a college campus can have (p.74). The Incident Preparedness Plan outlines efficient communication devices, as well as general protocols for situations like a campus shooter or a building fire. This also follows current theory published by Hayes, Hendrix and Kumar (2013) that a crisis management plan should be proactive and prepare for worst-case scenarios. The Incident Preparedness Plan lists possible emergencies like, campus fires, bomb threats and hostage situations, so that in the event of one of these instances occurring, the crisis management team will be prepared to handle it. MSU's Vice President For Student Affairs reviews the Incident Preparedness Plan every four years (or as needed) in order to keep the plan relevant and beneficial. As Hayes, Hendrix and Kumar suggest, the standard meeting to review the IPP allows potential scenarios on the MSU campus to be added and adjusted as the possibility of new crises arise.

MSU's crisis management team, called the Crisis Action Team, is another standard theory MSU followed when developing its crisis management plan. Zdziarski (2007) stated the importance of creating a team who is in charge of handling the response in a crisis situation. The Incident Preparedness Plan calls for a Crisis Action Team whose



members have unrestricted access on the MSU campus during crises. During the shooting situation, the CAT immediately gathered to coordinate a response to the event. The CAT was able to easily and effectively proceed due to the established crisis management plan.

Although minor in damage and scope, the weather related situations were a test to how the university could maintain the trust and respect of its most important public: MSU students. The university was clear and proactive about its intentions to make sure the students were placed in safe, comfortable housing. In this situation, MSU communications followed standard theory in two important ways. First, Salter published a press release to the MSU News Bureau providing the public and the media with all known information at that given time. Fearn-Banks (2007) wrote about the importance of giving the public any information available and never refusing to comment on a situation. One of her three suggested responses in a crisis situation was,

“We don’t know everything at this time. Here’s what we know. We’ll find out more and let you know” (p. 25).

Salter practiced this theory with perfection. In his press release he stated, “We will have more details for the media tomorrow, but this is about the extent of the information we can make available tonight.”

Secondly, Mark Keenum, MSU President, served as spokesperson during this crisis. Hayes and colleagues suggest that the spokesperson during a crisis be someone of “high credibility” (p. 350). On a college campus, few people are of higher merit than the university president. Choosing Keenum as spokesperson also practiced Fearn-Banks’s crisis communication theory, which states that the president or CEO of an organization

should serve as spokesperson, rather than the public relations official. Keenum made all public statements during the weather-related crises. The designation of Keenum as spokesperson reduced conflicting statements from MSU as described by Fearn-Banks's theory.

## **Chapter Four: The University of Mississippi**

As previously mentioned, the author attends The University of Mississippi and was able to interview multiple public relations officials. Thus, the Ole Miss portion of this thesis is more intensive in research, interviews and case studies than the other two universities examined.

Being one of the largest public learning institutions in the state of Mississippi, The University of Mississippi, also referred to as “Ole Miss” in this thesis, has encountered a multitude of crises in its school history. These events include James Meredith’s admittance to The University of Mississippi in 1962, the Chi Omega tragedy in 1987, and the fatal fire at the Alpha Tau Omega house in 2004. The above incidences were each handled by different Directors of Public Relations, but each story provides insight into how crises were handled in an age before social media and instant communication.

### **Introduction of Public Relations Professionals Interviewed**

Three different men were interviewed for information regarding six different crises discussed in this chapter. Dr. Ed Meek served as Assistant Vice Chancellor for Public Relations and Marketing from 1962 to the early 2000s. Meek handled communications during the Chi Omega Tragedy in 1987. Jeff Alford served as Vice Chancellor for University Relations when the next major crisis, the Alpha Tau Omega

fire, occurred in 2004. Alford held this position from January of 2000 to December of 2008. The third public relations professional interviewed is Danny Blanton, who currently serves as Director of Public Relations. Blanton has held this position since 2012. The remainder of this thesis will consist of subchapters examining past and more recent crises at The University of Mississippi.

### **Subchapter One: The Meredith Crisis**

In September of 1962, President John F. Kenney ordered troops to The University of Mississippi campus to ensure the safety of the enrollment of James Meredith, a black Mississippian (Street, p. 1). Violent riots erupted as Oxford locals and students protested the admittance of a black student to their university. “Mississippians had believed their governor, who promised them he would guarantee the federal government would ‘never’ force integration on them” (Street, 1985, p.1). Cars were burned, tear gas was used, and debris was scattered across the Ole Miss campus. In her thesis, titled *A Case Study in Crisis Public Relations: The Meredith Crisis at The University of Mississippi*, Lecturer in Journalism Robin Street stated that the riot left more than physical damage on the university. “The prestige, reputation, and future of the university, were in question,” (Street, p. 1).

The riots attracted intensive news coverage from across the country, which was unusual for the university located in a small Mississippi town. According to Street (1985), the university was in the spotlight: front-page news throughout the nation, the lead story on network news broadcasts, and the cover story of national magazines. “University public relations officials were beleaguered” (Street, p. 1-2).

These incidences called for a strong need for public relations work at the university. Ole Miss was slammed with negative news coverage from a majority of media outlets due to the university's resistance to integrate the public university. An editorial in the October 6, 1962 issue of *Nation* magazine "indicated the solid need for public relations work by the university" (Street, p. 55). The editorial (as cited in Street, 1985) stated,

"It would be no great loss if Ole Miss were closed. Patently it has failed as an educational institution. Judging from the attitude of students, it has not taught any biology or science for generations, nor has it succeeded in teaching constitutional law, history, or modern politics. Negro youngsters, for generations, have been deprived of a chance to secure an education in Mississippi; it will do no harm if white youngsters are momentarily deprived—especially as the education they have been getting is poor." (p. 189)

The above statement exemplifies the criticism and public hatred Ole Miss received from outlets across the country.

Governor Ross Barnett appointed the members of the Board of Trustees for Institutions of Higher Learning, so, essentially, he could have complete control over the board (Street, p. 56). The chancellor, faculty and staff at the university were generally afraid to speak out about the situation on their campus in fear of upsetting the Board and losing their jobs. Two resolutions were passed in September of 1962 enhancing the governor's power and decreasing the power of the university and the board members. On September 4, 1962, "the board passed a resolution which 'withdrew the University officials the authority to act on Meredith's application to enroll'" (Street, p. 56). The

second resolution, passed on September 20, 1962, abdicated the board members responsibility. This resolution appointed the governor with “full power, authority, right and discretion of the board to act upon all matters pertaining to...the registration or non-registration...of James H. Meredith at The University of Mississippi” (Street, p. 56).

Mississippi and Ole Miss resided in a state of confusion between Governor Barnett’s orders and the orders from the federal government. In this time, “university officials were besieged by reporters wanting clear, coherent, timely information” (Street, p. 63). According to Street (1985) more than 300 reporters were logged being on campus between September 18, 1962 and March 18, 1963 (p. 63).

The university assigned three university officials the responsibility of handling the media (Street, p. 65). The three officials were “Pat Smith, director of public information, Hugh Clegg, director of development and assistant to the chancellor, and Chancellor J.D. Williams” (Street, p. 65).

Clegg assigned the Lyceum boardroom as media headquarters for reporters (Street, p. 68). The same room also hosted press conferences by the Justice Department for a period of time. The reporters were to abide by certain rules established by the university and were required to wear nametags to be easily identified. In his unpublished memoir, Clegg (as cited in Street, 1985) wrote about the environment for reporters on campus during the crisis,

“No reporters on campus after sundown or before 8 a.m. If major troubles arose, the campus was to be open to newsmen at all hours. No photographs were allowed of individual students without the student’s permission, but group photographs were allowed. This phase of the planning apparently worked out real

well, for several newsmen came to me with complimentary statements about the arrangements.” (p. 68)

Along with the plan to handle reporters, Street writes about a plan to ensure “the peaceful arrival of Meredith on campus” (Street, p.75). The plan was constructed in a meeting on Sunday, September 30, 1962 with Chancellor Williams, Hugh Clegg and Dean of Students L. L. Love. Street (1985) cites a “UM Report” recollected by Dean Love. He said:

“The immediate purpose of the meeting was to plan a special issue of The Mississippian which was to be placed in every room on the campus early the next morning. In it were to be statements from the Chancellor and a number of other prominent and influential persons intended to give a sense of direction to students and instruct them in the conduct that was expected of them when Meredith arrived. Also planned were tape recordings by the Chancellor and me, which would be broadcast frequently over Campus Radio Station WCBH during the night.” (Street, p. 75).

The crisis management plans, although great in theory, deemed unhelpful when Meredith and the U.S. Marshals arrived on the Ole Miss campus earlier than expected.

The three spokespeople mentioned above, led to problems in the crisis management of the Meredith crisis. As crisis management protocol states, there should be one spokesperson in a crisis situation in order to keep information accurate and unified. In the Meredith crisis, “no central person was giving out all information” (Street, p. 76).

Along with having no central spokesperson, “rumor control” was also a problem on the Ole Miss campus during the Meredith crisis (Street, p. 76). Even without social media and today’s technology, rumors still ran rampant around campus. There were rumors about the safety and health of staff and students, and most were deemed untrue.

## **Evaluation**

Without knowing it, The University of Mississippi was practicing crisis public relations. Research by Fearn-Banks (2007) and Zdziarski (2007) has proven that devising a crisis communications plan is necessary for handling a disaster situation effectively and efficiently. Clegg practiced this by setting guidelines and restrictions for the news media during campus situations and preparing tape recordings to play during the crisis, although they were never used.

During the Meredith crisis, the university also followed current theory to an extent regarding the use of spokespeople. Although the use of three spokespeople was not ideal, having a small number of respected university officials to handle communications to the media and public agreed with Hayes’s (2013) theory that an organization should have a spokesperson of high credibility (p. 350).

Although times have drastically changed since the 1960s, several public relations practices are still relevant in the case studies presented that have occurred in the past ten years. While the means of going about crisis management are different, the foundation of handling crisis situations has remained the same.



## **Subchapter Two: The Meek Era**

### **Information on Public Relations Professional Interviewed**

Dr. Ed Meek began his career at The University of Mississippi in 1962 as a staff writer in the public relations office, and in 1964, at age 24, Meek became the youngest-ever Assistant Vice Chancellor for Public Relations and Marketing (“About Meek”). He served the university in this position and as an associate professor of journalism for a total of 37 years (“About Meek”). As the benefactor for whom the school is named, Dr. Meek is still highly involved with The Meek School of Journalism and New Media.

### **The University of Mississippi Crisis Plan**

Despite the Meredith crisis, Ole Miss officials had still not formulated a crisis plan for the university at the time of the next crisis in 1987. “We didn’t even know what that (a crisis plan) was,” said Meek. Everything about the Chi Omega tragedy was a lesson learned for the Ole Miss communications department.

### **Crisis: The Chi Omega Tragedy**

While Dr. Meek served as Assistant Vice Chancellor for Public Relations and Marketing at Ole Miss, he dealt with the crisis surrounding the death of five female students. On March 26, 1987, “members of Chi Omega sorority were participating in the 20-mile walk from Batesville to Oxford along the shoulder of four-lane Mississippi Highway 6 to raise money for the Kidney Foundation” (United Press International, 1987).

“At 2:25 P.M., 20 girls were still out there making their way home” (Williams, 2012). One sorority member was driving a Nissan Maxima, so the girls could take breaks, and the others walked close behind and in front of the car. A truck came over the hill behind where the girls were walking and chaos ensued:

“A few girls turned in time to see a flatbed pickup, towing a two-ton hay baler, plow over the Maxima with the full force of its weight. The Maxima flipped into the girls. The truck flipped into the girls. The hay baler, a massive, spiked, medieval-looking machine, wrenched free of its hitch and barreled through the girls.” (Williams, 2012)

Two women were dead on the scene, one woman died shortly after being taken to the hospital in Memphis, two more women died two days later on March 28, 1987, and there were up to eleven additional injuries from the wreck.

Dr. Ed Meek was at home when he got the call from the police. The extent of the injuries was unknown at the time, but he knew there were deaths. Meek proceeded to call then-Chancellor Gerald Turner. “We rushed to the hospital, and I saw the girls being brought in—some of who survived, and one of them, my good friend, who did not survive,” said Meek.

Dr. Meek, who has worked for five different chancellors and has overseen numerous unfortunate situations at Ole Miss, never dealt with something as tragic as the wreck in 1987. “I’ve been through the riots, and I’ve been through many, many crises, but I don’t think anything will ever surpass me having to get on the phone, call the parents and tell them their child was involved,” said Meek. Meek was instructed to not

tell the parents that their daughter had died. Instead, he was told to say, “She is here. Come now.”

In the beginning, Chancellor Turner and Dr. Meek handled the crisis from the hospital; however, the accident was a story for quite some time as it followed the trial of the man driving the truck and what exactly happened. “I don’t think anyone ever figured out what had gone on,” said Meek. Inundated with media from across the country, it was a very significant story. “It was just a traumatic part of my life,” said Meek.

As a result of the accident, the university and communications officials came up with a protocol for whom to call when an event like this occurred. They also learned that “the buck stops in every county in Mississippi with the sheriff,” said Meek. After learning this, Dr. Meek put together a crisis plan where he was the contact person for Buddy East, Lafayette County Sheriff. “Before all of this I don’t think we had a clue,” said Meek. “I found out that’s a very hard and fast rule in law enforcement.”

If this crisis had occurred today in an age of social media, Dr. Meek believes it would be much more difficult to handle than in 1987. This is primarily due to the change in the news cycle since print media. “Back then, when I first started in the business, the news cycle was 24 hours,” said Meek. The newspaper came out the next day. When television came along, there was a morning newscast and an afternoon newscast. Now, the Internet drives everything, and institutions don’t have the ability to control the flow of information.

“We were the source, and the way to get [information] out was either the 6:00 news or the morning newspaper,” said Meek. “So now, information goes out from the nurse in the admitting room, who would most likely be tweeting, and that creates many

problems *and* opportunities.” With social media you get the wrong pictures of situations because you see just a tiny bit of it. “People pick up what they hear, post it, and the part ‘I hear’ becomes lost,” said Meek. “It becomes fact, and before you know it, that’s repeated.” Meek believes this presents a huge problem, as well as a huge opportunity to future crisis communications efforts.

## **Evaluation**

Most common current communications theory cannot be applied to this crisis, since there was no crisis communications plan in place at Ole Miss; however Meek and the communications staff communicated well with the media as current theory encourages. Fearn-Banks (2007) states the importance of public relations professionals being able to contact the media and hold interviews. Since, there were no methods of social media, Meek had the ability to be the one source of information regarding the crisis.

Meek and the university communications department learned a great deal about communicating during a crisis during the Chi Omega tragedy. As he mentioned above, Meek formulated a crisis plan following this event, involving Buddy East, the Lafayette County Sheriff, in future crisis situations at Ole Miss.

### **Subchapter Three: The Alford Era**

#### **Information on Public Relations Professional Interviewed**

Jeff Alford, who served as Vice Chancellor for University Relations at Ole Miss, is the next public relations professional interviewed. Prior to working at Ole Miss, Alford worked in university communications at The University of Florida for four years and Ball State in Indiana for thirteen years. One of the incidences Alford oversaw was the fire at the Alpha Tau Omega (ATO) on the Ole Miss campus in 2004, one of the most tragic events to occur at the school.

#### **The University of Mississippi Crisis Communications Plan**

By this time, during the early 2000s, the University had a very well structured crisis plan, consisting of a notification ladder. The Chief of University Police would notify Dean of Students if there were students involved, and then he would notify Alford, who would notify his boss, the Vice Chancellor. “There was a very structured chain, so we would just go down the telephone list, and I was the second person who was called,” said Alford. When an incident involved students, Dean of Students Sparky Reardon received the first call. If the incident pertained to weather or destruction property, the Vice Chancellor of Business Affairs received the first call. In both situations, however, Alford was always the second person to notified.

“The public relations office really has to be on top of the communication chain,” said Alford. This proved to be true in the ATO fire situation. Alford said, “The fact of the matter is, with the ATO fire, I was notified even before the chancellor was, which is

pretty unusual on most campuses.” Normally the chancellor or president of a university would receive the first call, but “because we sat down and thought the process through ahead of time, we decided it was more important that I be able to respond first,” said Alford.

In addition to the communications plan, the University had an arrangement with the City of Oxford. Whenever the Oxford Fire Department or Oxford Police Department was involved with anything on campus, the University Public Relations Office would hold the authority to handle all of the media relations and any public announcements that were to come from the event.

### **Crisis: Alpha Tau Omega Fire**

The third crisis was the fire at the Alpha Tau Omega (ATO) house on the Ole Miss campus, one of the most tragic accidents to occur at the school. Around 4:30 a.m. on August 27<sup>th</sup> 2004, Alford received a call from current Dean of Students Sparky Reardon informing him that there was a fire at the ATO house and that it was serious. The Oxford Fire Department was on the scene, and Sparky was on his way to campus. “I remember getting dressed and getting over there as fast as I could,” said Alford. Alford arrived on the scene around 5:00 a.m. “The sun hadn’t come up yet, it was still dark, and the ATO house was completely engulfed in flames.”

The first thing Alford did was go to the command center with the fire chief and find out everything he knew at the time. It was early on in the process, so emergency officials were still unsure of how many people were in the house at the time of the fire, how many people may have escaped, and how many people might still be in the house.

Alford remained in the command center for thirty to forty-five minutes before information was released.

One of the first pieces of information available was that there were roughly twenty people in the house at the time of the fire, including the housemother. Soon after officials knew there were three people unaccounted for. The fire and police departments continued the process of trying to identify who those three people were. “It was about 7:00 a.m. when we found out there were going to be fatalities,” said Alford. “It was a matter of identifying who they were and notifying the next of kin, which, of course, took some time.” The press started showing up around the same time.

The first media on the scene were a Memphis news station, The Oxford Eagle, and The Daily Mississippian. “By 7:00 or 8:00 in the morning we had a fairly large number of media who had arrived and were in the street right in front of the ATO house,” said Alford. Alford made the first announcement to the media at 8:00 a.m. “I was standing there right on the curb in front of the house as the fire department was still trying to put out the fire behind me.”

Alford announced there were twenty people, including the housemother, who escaped and three people who had not been accounted for. The questions that followed from the media were ones that Alford prepared for, like “who are they?” and “what happened to them?” “At that time we couldn’t give away that kind of information, so I spent the next couple of hours in the command center with the fire and police department, and as the information came into them, I knew,” said Alford.

Once the firefighters were able to determine how many bodies were left in the house and who they were, that information went straight to the command center. The

information was shared with Alford and as the facts were ready for release, Alford was able to go back out, meet with the press, and give them more details. Alford made all press statements regarding the men in the house after speaking with each of their families.

“There were two [bodies] we were able to identify almost immediately,” said Alford. These two men died of smoke inhalation, so their bodies were easily identifiable. “The third [body] was the young man in whose room the fire started,” said Alford. His body was burned severely, making it much harder to identify. It wasn’t until 12:00 p.m. that the third body was identified, and Alford notified all parents. At this time, a press conference was scheduled to make another public statement.

By the time Alford was ready to hold the press conference, at least twenty-five to thirty media representatives from Jackson, Memphis and Tupelo were present at the ATO house. “By noon, we realized we were going to have to get the media away from the site and provide some type of telephone access and other links for them to be able to file their stories,” said Alford. Alford, along with the fire chief, Chancellor Robert Khayat and Sparky Reardon met with the media in the University Relations office. In this press conference, Alford spoke with the media and released all detailed information necessary for the use of the media: who the victims were and how the fire started. There was enough evidence collected at this time to completely rule out arson.

“One of the things later on that turned out to be fairly significant was that we learned from the Physical Plant Department that they had done a standard fire inspection of the building just before fall semester started,” said Alford. In this inspection, the department went through the ATO house, as they did with all other sorority and fraternity



houses, and made sure everything was according to code. After the fire, the Physical Plant Department shared the fire prevention report with Alford and his team. The report found that there were several violations in the ATO house.

“It was nothing terribly serious,” said Alford. “The kitchen didn’t have the right number of extinguishers, they had paint stored in the basement and there were some interior doors in some of the hallways that had been blocked with mattresses and other furniture.” One of the biggest issues that later developed was that there was no sprinkler system in the building.

Following the fire, Chancellor Khayat made the decision to have the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives initiate the investigation. “The university and the Oxford Fire Department had the authority to do the investigation too, but we agreed with the city that it was important to bring in an independent third party to investigate the cause,” said Alford.

A representative from New Orleans conducted the investigation, and all of the information for the inspection was available within eight hours after the fire started. “In hindsight I think that turned out to be the smartest thing we could have done,” said Alford. “The longer it takes to get those questions answered, and if all of that gets dragged out over a period of days, it just makes the situation more difficult to handle.” The longer it takes for information to be released, the more suspicious everybody becomes. The fire inspection report was the best example of preventing distrust with the publics involved. “It became clear to everybody that we were sharing everything we knew,” said Alford. “That report didn’t favor ATO, and it was clear that it was ok with us.”

Alford said the ATO fire verified a lot of things that the University Communications staff thought were important and had considered far ahead of time. “Our plan worked like a charm,” said Alford. Much of the plan’s success was due to the notification system. Within twenty minutes of the fire station receiving the call about the fire, Alford was at the ATO house. “It was all in writing, and everybody that played a role had a copy and knew exactly what their responsibilities were, what they could do and what they could not do during that time,” said Alford.

Another measure Alford took upon taking his position at the university was establishing a strong relationship with the city fire and police departments. “When I first started working at the university, one of the first things I did was introduce myself to the Oxford Police Chief and the Oxford Fire Chief to try and create a personal relationship with them, so they would learn to have confidence and trust in me,” said Alford. Alford wanted to make sure that these two city officials knew that whatever they told him would stay in confidence if it needed to be, and if they weren’t sure about whether information should be publicized, Alford would be able to make that judgment. “When the crisis occurred there was no hesitation about sharing information or being able to trust either way,” said Alford. “That turned out to be critical in the whole process.”

The strong town-gown relationship between Oxford and The University of Mississippi is not so common in other university towns. Alford said,

“I have talked to colleagues at other universities and that is unheard of in a lot of places. In nine out of ten places, the official in charge of a crisis like that, is not let in the command center. It’s unheard of. I walked right in, and they were expecting me. That made all the difference in the world.”

Alford recalls one change the university made to its communications plan following the ATO fire. At the time of the crisis, the communications department relied on cell phone use. From Alford's office to the chancellor's office to the Physical Plant Department, cell phones were the means of communication. On the morning of the fire, cell phones were jammed up because everyone was calling home and people's parents were calling them to make sure they were safe. "My phone stopped working for a period of time, and no one could get through to me," said Alford.

After the fire, the communications department began providing two-way radios. The communications department had one in their office that connected with a radio at the physical plant and in the University Police Department. "That [the radios] became crucial a couple of years later when there was a tornado watch on campus," said Alford. "That was a very significant issue we learned as a result of that experience; we needed to find a better way to communicate internally."

Alford also shared his professional opinion on how this situation would differ if it had occurred within the last five years, as social media has become a dominant method of communication. "Social media has completely changed the way news, information or disinformation gets out," said Alford. Now, there is no one screening information before it is published on social media. Everybody with a smartphone is a news reporter, in a sense, because they can release information and communicate to a wide number of people without ever having to verify anything they are posting. Now as misinformation goes out, communications professionals must devote time to counteract or contradict this false information. "The whole social media phenomenon has changed the way mass communication is handled, and unfortunately I don't think it's for the best," said Alford.

When the ATO fire occurred in 2004 information was easily controlled. “There was a bottleneck, and it was us,” said Alford. “When the information passed through us, if we didn’t release it, no one would know.” In the fire situation it was critical that university communications were forthcoming, and it benefited those officials to have control of information. “We could control the flow of information as much as we wanted, as much as we felt was necessary, or as much as we were willing to,” said Alford.

Alford believes the job responsibilities of public relations professionals and organizations has greatly changed due to social media. “Public relations organizations spend more time now putting down incorrect information and quelling rumors than we did at the time,” said Alford. “It’s a completely different world now when everyone’s got a smartphone and a camera and can send out anything they want.”

## **Evaluation**

Although this crisis is not necessarily current, Alford practiced several methods of current communications theory. Alford never refused to comment and was honest with the public from the start. He followed the three responses suggested by Fearn-Banks to media requests (p. 25). He gave all known information to the public, as soon as he knew the information. No comments were made until the emergency officials verified them.

Another important current theory Alford practiced was the use of a crisis communications team, particularly the use of the notification ladder. Dean of Students Sparky Reardon and Jeff Alford served on the communications team, which, as Zdziarski suggests, consisted of a team of people who had the responsibility of handling a crisis

communications response. The notification ladder was so detailed that in the event of the ATO fire, there was no hesitation of who should communicate with whom. This coincides with Zdziarski's (2007) research that "team members need a clear understanding of the initial activities involved in managing any crisis" (p. 64-65). Of all Ole Miss crises discussed, this incident proved the importance of a crisis communications plan, as the handling of this crisis was flawless despite the unfortunate circumstances.

### **Subchapter Four: The Blanton Era**

#### **Information on Public Relations Professional Interviewed**

Danny Blanton is the current Director of Communications at Ole Miss. Blanton brought "more than twenty-four years of experience in military, corporate, political, and non-profit sector public relations" to the Ole Miss job (Smith, 2012). An Ole Miss graduate, Blanton most recently served as NATO's public affairs adviser to the Afghan Ministry of Defense located in Afghanistan. His extensive work abroad and domestically has provided him with valuable information in communications leadership.

#### **The University of Mississippi Current Crisis Communications Plan**

Similar to the practice of most public relations professionals, Danny Blanton drafted a communications plan upon his arrival at Ole Miss in 2012. The communications plan was incorporated into a broader Incident Response Plan maintained by Dr. Noel Wilkin, who is the head of the Incident Response Team for the university. Blanton and Wilkin's crisis plan for communications covered several areas, including

logistics, personnel, operations, and initial response. The Incident Response Plan also identifies a Bias Incident Response Team (BIRT). BIRT was an integral part to the response of the three crises examined further in this chapter.

Blanton also drafted “battle drills” to be used to determine such things as initial response, a timeline for follow-on responses, whether an internal operations center or a joint operations center would be needed, and where to set up operations. Blanton, who was familiar with other various disaster scenarios and precedents other universities had set, prepared for events such as an active shooter, tornado, earthquake, fire, or pandemic. Blanton soon learned, however, that he had not planned for the events that would occur on the Ole Miss campus. “I hadn’t anticipated the type of incidents we would be responding to here on our campus,” said Blanton.

Blanton states that a crisis plan is absolutely necessary, but on a college campus it’s certainly not absolute. “It’s a living document—constantly adapting and developing as the situations dictate,” said Blanton. In each of the following events, the crisis plan for communication at The University of Mississippi was altered per situation; however, Blanton believes that by adjusting the plan to account for emerging trends, the university is better prepared for if and when those incidents occur again.

### **Crisis: 2012 Election Night**

On November 6, 2012, the “election night incident” occurred. Shortly after the announcement of the 2012 election results, a group of Ole Miss students began protesting President Barack Obama’s reelection. Racial slurs were exchanged and an Obama, Biden campaign sign was set on fire (Johnson, 2012).

It was not until 5:00 a.m. the following morning that Blanton received word of the previous nights' events. He was awoken by a call from Sparky Reardon, Dean of Students at the time, telling him to turn on his television to WMC-TV stationed in Memphis. "This had escalated beyond our control before we had even awakened to learn what had allegedly happened," said Blanton.

The incident was recognized by an abundance of other national media including The Washington Post, The USA Today and The Huffington Post. As media and social media picked up on the current news on the Ole Miss campus, the incident soon became termed as a "riot." The new name for the protests exaggerated the incident as well as attracted negative media and publicity to The University of Mississippi and Oxford.

Coincidentally, the election night incident occurred only a short month after the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Integration on the Ole Miss campus. Blanton stated, "It [the protest] was especially challenging in that it negated all the success from the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary events." The University's efforts to mend its often criticized past was pushed backwards due to the divide the protests created. Blanton stated, "Not only did we have to respond, but we were forced to counter extreme miscommunication on a national level."

According to a report conducted by the Incident Review Committee (IRC) at Ole Miss, social media fueled the incident. The report found that "student misrepresentations on social media, including Facebook and Twitter, were fuel for the events that happened on campus that night" (Admin, 2013).

The first thing Blanton did to communicate with the public was post on social media. "It takes time to draft a statement, but if you don't say something immediately then you will find yourself responding to rumors and misinformation," said Blanton. The

university communications' first action is always to create a 140-character tweet to set the groundwork for accurate information to follow. Blanton also states the importance of ongoing social media during a crisis. "You can never have a period of silence on social media during a crisis situation" he said. Within a couple of hours Blanton and his team had a statement drafted of factual details, which was released to the media and posted on social media.

The election night incident is one the unanticipated events Blanton previously mentioned, and he quickly realized there was a need to revise the crisis plan. "Following the election night incident, we updated our crisis plan to incorporate not only disruptive student behavior, but we saw the need for a much more robust social media component, for first response as well as reaction," said Blanton.

### **Crisis: The Laramie Project**

The second event that required crisis communication skills at Ole Miss occurred on Thursday, September 6, 2013. The University of Mississippi Theatre Department was in the middle of performing *The Laramie Project*. *The Laramie Project* is a play created by Tectonic Theatre Company in response to the murder of a homosexual male college student at the University of Wyoming, Matthew Shepard (Matthew Shepard Foundation).

*The Daily Mississippian* (2013) reported that during the Thursday night performance at the University of Mississippi there were questionable disturbances from the audience. "According to the play's director and theater faculty member, Rory Ledbetter, some audience members used derogatory slurs like 'fag' and heckled both cast members and the character they were portraying for their body types and sexual



orientations” (Ganuchau, 2013). Ganuchau (2013) also reported the audience became so disruptive at some points that it made it difficult for cast members to perform to their best ability.

Similar to the election night incident, the media covered the story before the university and Danny Blanton could get to it. “I was made aware of this incident from a banner headline on the front page of *The Daily Mississippian*,” said Blanton. Blanton explained that before he could investigate the incident, *The Clarion Ledger* had already picked up the story, and from that publication, it ran in several national media outlets. “In this instance we were never able to effectively counter misinformation because we were never able to find anyone who could identify any one individual who was involved in disruptive behavior,” said Blanton.

In response to the disruptive behavior at the play, BIRT released a statement reporting their immediate intervention and their intent to “respond in a prompt and efficient manner to address the reported inappropriate behavior that took place on October 1” (Bias Incident Response Team). Chancellor Dan Jones and Athletic Director Ross Bjork, wrote an apology letter to the Ole Miss community informing the public on the actions to be taken by the athletic department, and how student-athletes will be educated in the future on “individuality and tolerance” (Special to Ole Miss News).

Following the incident at *The Laramie Project*, Blanton and his colleagues “built in certain triggers that would essentially activate our crisis plan.” These incidents encompass anything involving violence against a student, racial or biased charged incidents, and crime. In addition to installing these triggers, the communications department has worked closely with the University Police Department and the Dean of

Students Office to ensure Blanton and other university communications staff is on their call lists in order to be notified of any incidents involving the crisis triggers.

### **Crisis: Defamation of the James Meredith Statue**

The third and most recent incident discussed in Blanton's interview is the James Meredith statue incident, which occurred on Sunday, February 16, 2014. Blanton stated, "Of the three crisis situations I've listed, this is the one incident we were able to get in front of." Blanton received a call from Sparky Reardon, "saying three individuals had been seen the previous Sunday tying a noose around the neck of the statue and draping an old Georgia flag (with the confederate emblem) over its head." In this situation, Reardon served as the whistle blower, who identified the problem and notified Blanton, who was able to get to the media before they could cover the racially sparked incident on the Ole Miss campus.

Quickly after the event occurred, Blanton and his staff started working on a statement to release to the public. "We gathered immediately to draft a statement of strong condemnation from the university and announced the offer of a \$25,000 reward from the Alumni Association for information leading to the apprehension of the suspects." The statement included Chancellor Jones's condemnation of the action "as contrary to the beliefs and values of the university community" (Staff Report, 2014).

Similar to the other two scenarios, the destruction of the James Meredith statue received national attention. Blanton began receiving calls from the media (newspaper, television, and radio) requesting interviews. "I spent the better part of a weekend responding to most every major newspaper and network you could think of," said

Blanton. Blanton immediately began coordinating the interview requests, whether they were with himself or Chancellor Dan Jones.

Due to Blanton and the university's proactive response, Blanton believes the university had an advantage in the situation. Blanton stated, "All reporting included the university's action taken, rather than our response, which is more than we had before. With the adjustments made after the Election Night and Laramie Project incidents, Blanton was much more prepared to respond to the James Meredith statue incident.

On Friday, March 2, 2015, over a year after this event occurred Blanton sent a press release to Ole Miss students and staff announcing an indictment related to the desecration of the James Meredith statue. The press release included an article from The United States Department of Justice detailing the indictment, as well as responses from Chancellor Dan Jones and Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Brandi Hephner LaBanc.

## **Evaluation**

The crises at Ole Miss in the past five years have been larger in scope and more harmful to the school's reputation than the other two universities examined. Although the outcome of each situation was not ideal, Blanton and his team learned from each situation to better prepare for the next crisis.

Like the other two Mississippi universities discussed, Blanton followed current crisis communications theory and developed a crisis management plan as one of his first tasks at Ole Miss. The crisis management plan at Ole Miss is called an "Incident Response Plan." Blanton's response plan included a basic plan, as well as a set of crisis

protocols. Research from Zdziarski (2007) proves that these two components are essential for a “good crisis plan” (p.78).

The election-night incident was unique in that social media was a substantial cause of the negative publicity. Hyper-transparency, defined by Williamson and Johnston (2012), was a major social media issue during this crisis. Ole Miss students posted information on their personal social media accounts, especially Twitter, speaking as if they knew the facts, essentially creating their own news with little truth to their stories. Like research from Fearn-Banks (2007) says, this crisis was caused by a mere negative rumor. In response to the social media blasts, the university announced efforts that coincide with the suggested National Public Relations Association approaches cited in Williamson and Johnston’s *The School Leader’s Guide to Social Media*. Blanton’s communications efforts include all of the following approaches suggested by research: getting timely and accurate information to key audiences, ensuring the public the rumors are being addressed, and getting specific details of the rumor (William & Johnston, 2007, p.59).

Regarding the second crisis, *The Laramie Project* incident, Blanton followed current crisis communications theory by not ignoring the incident as Fearn-Banks suggests. Although the communications team did not catch this trigger before the media, Blanton made sure that he released information via social media and an official statement with factual information for the public. Fearn-Banks also encourages the public relations official to be skilled at contacting and dealing with the media. Blanton practiced this theory in all three situations by responding to media requests in a professional and timely manner.

The third incident, the defamation of the James Meredith statue, differed in communications response compared to the other two Ole Miss crises. Before the media was alerted, Blanton received news of the defamation to the Meredith statue and was able to make a proactive statement to the public. While his proactive behavior did not stop the incident from occurring, it did put Blanton and the communications team at the forefront of this crisis. Fearn-Banks (2007) stated that effective crisis management does not only “alleviate or eliminate the crisis,” but it also brings a more positive reputation to the environment (p. 9). By issuing the statement detailing the \$25,000 reward and Chancellor Jones’s condemnation of the act, the situation ultimately resulted in great strides toward a more inclusive campus.

Blanton’s speediness in publishing information also followed current crisis communications theory. According to Zdziarski (2007), the faster an institution responds to a crisis, the more effective the efforts are (p. 97). Immediately after learning about the defamation of the statue, Blanton released a statement, even beating the media to covering the story. The facts of the incident came from the university, not outside media, which helped the university gain trust and respect from its publics.

From 2004, when the ATO house burned down, to 2014, when the James Meredith statue was defamed, there has been one consistent tier of communication at Ole Miss. From the Dean of Student to Director of Communications, this latter of communication has proven flawless in the execution and release of information during the crisis situations. As Zdziarski’s research states, one of the components of a successful crisis management plan is a set of crisis protocols, which are often step-by-step accounts of what should take place during a crisis. The communications latter does

this for Ole Miss. Each member of the crisis management team knows whom to contact next and the next person knows what to say and how to say it, ultimately eliminating hesitation and confusion during a campus crisis.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

Each of the three Mississippi universities examined in this thesis executed communication in different ways depending on the crisis encountered. While all three schools had a crisis plan of some sort in place, The University of Southern Mississippi and Mississippi State University's plans were more detailed in the aspect of protocols. Danny Blanton's Incident Response Plan included "battle drills" for situations that may occur, but there were no established protocols for the types of situations that occurred at Ole Miss.

One important current crisis communications theory mentioned in the research section of this thesis was not practiced by any of the three schools. Zdziarski's research found that one of the most effective methods of communicating during a crisis was the use of a dark website. This method would have been particularly helpful in the crisis situations at Ole Miss. For all three crises, information could have been posted on the dark website at the same time information was given to the media. This website could have served as a place to post answers to common questions the university's publics may have.

One common factor all three universities practiced was the use of social media, although the three older crises at Ole Miss—James Meredith's admittance, the Chi Omega tragedy, and the ATO fire—exemplified communications efforts when social media was not a factor. Now, Ole Miss and the other two Mississippi universities

examined have adapted methods of communicating via social media during crises. In MSU and Southern Miss's crisis plans, there is a position on the crisis management teams for a social media specialist, and Blanton explained the importance of social media during the three Ole Miss crisis situations. When the ATO house caught fire, barely ten years ago, social media played no factor in the crisis communications of that event. As Jeff Alford discussed, the biggest issue at that time was the use of cell phones. All three major Mississippi universities have realized the importance of social media in crisis communications and have embraced this phenomenon and learned how to use it to their benefit.

Mississippi State University followed current theory most efficiently in regards to establishing a spokesperson for any crisis that might arise. President Mark Keenum served as spokesperson during the shooting crisis at MSU. Southern Miss and Ole Miss were less effective in this aspect. Due to unforeseen circumstances, Southern Miss's president was not able to serve as spokesperson. Instead of assigning the position to one other well-respected leader, Southern Miss allowed several different people to serve as spokesperson, which is not suggested by current theory. During the crises at Ole Miss, Blanton often served as spokesperson. This is not unmanageable, but current theory suggests that the public relations officials do not serve as spokespeople. Chancellor Dan Jones did make statements during the events at Ole Miss, but if he had made all statements, the university's image would have been more unified in the eyes of its publics.

In an overall evaluation, each of the universities did more right than wrong. From establishing a crisis management plan and crisis management team to always being



honest and upfront with the publics and the media, the reputation's of these three schools has not been detrimentally harmed in any of its crisis situations. More importantly, each school has learned from their individual crises and adjusted their school's crisis management plans as needed in order to prevent crises of similar nature from occurring.

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